BACK TRACK

Blending Arpeggios & Scales

BY ANDY ELLIS

IN OUR ONGOING EXPLO-ration of improvisational tools and techniques, we've sketched out modes and started to work with "glove" and key-centered "umbrella" scale strategies. Last month, we took a break from scale-oriented soloing approaches by investigating an arpeggio-oriented system (see "Spinning Enhanced Arpeggios," June '00).

As promised, we'll now combine the enhanced arpeggio and glove scale techniques. Let's begin by quickly recapping the two techniques we'll use in this lesson.

The glove scale. When a chord's component notes are contained within a particular scale, you can use that scale to improvise melodically over the chord. The scale fits the harmony like a glove—hence the moniker. For example, because *A* Dorian (*A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, *F*♯, *G*) contains *Am7*'s chord tones (*A*, *C*, *E*, *G*), you can play *A* Dorian over *Am7*. While some other modes and scales also contain these chord tones, and your scale choice is frequently determined by the larger harmonic context, playing Dorian over extended minor 7th vamps will typically yield excellent results.

The enhanced arpeggio. Tipping a chord on its side let us express its sound melodically as opposed to harmonically. In the process, we move from a vertical stack to a horizontal chain of chord tones. Because most arpeggios consist of only three to six notes, we need to expand our note choices by adding links to the chain. We accomplish this by inserting selected "neighbor" tones between the arpeggio's chord tones. These neighbor tones can lie a whole-step or half-step above or below the chord tones, and you choose them by ear.

Compared to the formal system of matching modes to harmony, the enhanced arpeggio technique is visceral and intuitive. Don't spend time being overly analytical about neighbor tones. Instead, befriend those that sound good to you when played in conjunction with a particular voicing, and leave it at that.

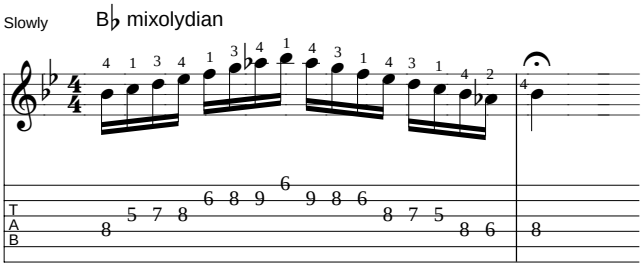
We're jammin'. The best way to make sense of any improvisational strategy is to apply it to the fretboard, so let's get rolling. **Ex. 1** shows a one-octave *B*♭ Mixolydian pattern. As we learned in the Dec. '99 Back Track, Mixolydian has a formula of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and ♭7. Applied to a *B*♭ major scale (*B*♭, *C*, *D*, *E*♭, *F*, *G*, *A*), this formula yields *B*♭, *C*, *D*, *E*♭, *F*, *G*, and *A*♭—or *B*♭ Mixolydian. Because *B*♭ Mixolydian contains *B*♭*7* chord tones (*B*♭, *D*, *F*, *A*♭), this mode works well over a *B*♭*7* vamp.

Once you've played Ex. 1's pattern a few times to get the sound of Mixolydian in your ears, look at **Ex. 2**. In the first two bars, we'll use the enhanced arpeggio technique to weave a line over the rapidly changing harmony—*D7*, *E*♭*7*, and *F7*. Find the chord tones (identified as CT), and then observe how they're linked with strategically placed neighbors—typically, chromatic passing tones.

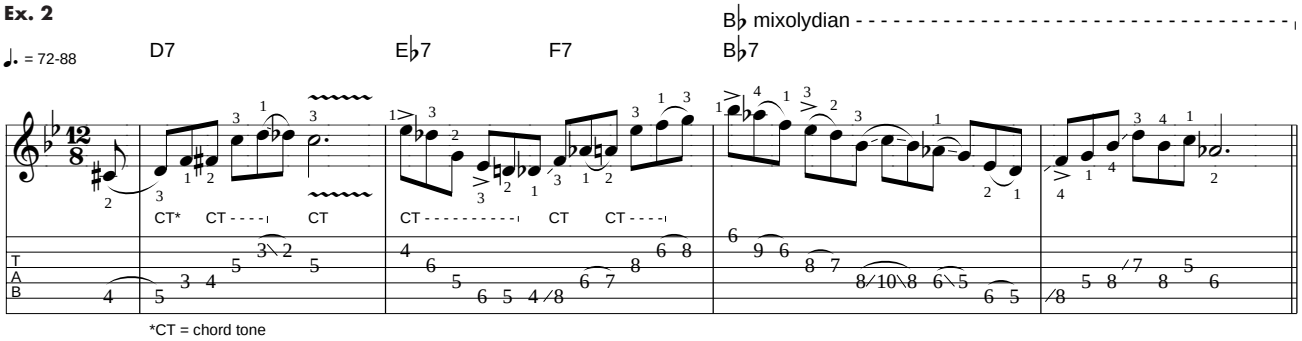
In bars 3 and 4, we switch to *B*♭ Mixolydian to craft a line over *B*♭*7*. We're staying in the Mixolydian framework with one exception—the chromatic passing tone (*C*♭) that connects beat three to beat four in bar 3.

Run with it. As always, to benefit from the ideas shown here, you'll need to develop them thoroughly on your own. Draft a few dominant 7th progressions, and try to solo over the harmony using both Mixolydian and enhanced arpeggio approaches. In general, the arpeggio technique works best for quick changes, while the modal approach shines over longer vamps.

Ex. 1



Ex. 2



*CT = chord tone